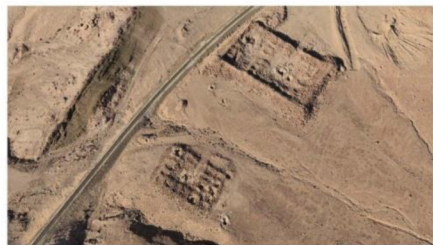


The title of the 2011 video by Omer Fast refers to the height that a remote-controlled drone needs to be to obtain the most favourable picture of the ground below. Under the steady hand of its operator, who may be nowhere in the vicinity, but sat in front of a screen at a command-centre thousands of miles away, the drone can be easily manoeuvred into place; or toggled up or down, with a swipe of a keypad, like a kite on a windy day. Once it is over its target, however, now hovering like a kestrel in pursuit of its prey, the drone usually settles into what its operators have learnt is its default height. The experience of countless mission hours has proven that for the optimal optical perspective, 5000 feet is the best.

What height is the best height to see from? For some, it is the 35,000 feet of an airliner's cruising altitude – with a window seat to drink in the view. For others, it is the observation deck of a very tall building – looking out from behind glass, or with the wind in their hair. For others still, it is from the gondola of a hot air balloon, or a cable car at the top of a mountain. Whatever the vantage point, at whatever the moment, it is likely that many of us will have taken a snapshot (or recorded a short video) that will go on to add to the already vast sum of all the aerial images currently in the world. Once the exclusive preserve of pioneering balloonists such as the Montgolfier Brothers, or the first awestruck visitors (including the photographer Nadar) to tourist attractions like the Eiffel Tower, vistas of a landscape (or a cityscape) observed from on high have now become an increasingly common phenomenon.

When you are up high, and can see for miles in every direction, the view can sometimes be too much to take in. Confronted with a surfeit of information, the eye alights instead on a series of details. All of which is a roundabout way of saying that the exhibition *At Altitude* does not purport to be a definitive panoramic overview of its subject but one that in its own way seeks to highlight particular key themes.



Free Admission Tuesday – Sunday 10am – 5pm.

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Prominent among these is the intimately close relationship between the rise of the aerial image and the development of military technology. As the theorist Paul Virilio notes in his seminal book *War and Cinema*, many of the advances in camera design and image magnification that have occurred over the last century and a half and more have stemmed from earlier battlefield applications, or have been swiftly recruited and mobilised in the service of military aims. Clearly inspired by Virilio's writings, and his compatriot Jean Baudrillard's musings on the spectacle of 'weaponised vision' at the time of the last Gulf War, Omer Fast's video *5000 Feet is the Best* is a study of new forms of virtual combat that is also an incisive critique of the ease with which we increasingly mistake (or substitute) images for reality: not only in the representation of conflict, but in so many areas of life. Featuring interviews with American drone pilots, who talk soberingly of the sense of alienation that they encounter in their job, the contrast between their backroom role and their frontline operations in places like Afghanistan is its own stark comment on the United States' insidious influence in contemporary geopolitics.

The video *Shadow Sites I* by Jananne Al-Ani makes a resonant companion piece. Shot from a light plane flying over a small area of the Middle East, the footage reveals how this pocket of apparently empty terrain is profoundly marked by tell-tale signs of human presence; some of them dating from the recent past, some of them remnants of ancient civilisations. Under the glare of the noonday sun, the land may seem featureless and inhospitable, but as the light softens and angles its way across the ground, unexpected details show up, as if slowly surfacing like ghostly imprints on photographic paper. Shadowy traces of both the worldly ambitions and the destructive conflicts of previous generations, these conspicuous marks (many only noticeable from the air) are as graphic as scars and as mysterious as hieroglyphs.

Whereas the god's-eye view of military surveillance speaks of an urge for mastery, the lure of flight (and a yearning to witness the earth from above) has long had an exhilarating, intoxicating quality; one that lifts the spirits and exalts the imagination. In Tacita Dean's short film, *A Bag of Air*, we note the strange, almost ritualistic sight of pairs of cupping hands seen in the act of manually funneling air into plastic bags, as if straining to capture this rare, ethereal element. Meanwhile, another 'bag of air', a hot air balloon, drifts across the sublime backdrop of the Alps – its serene, horizontal passage counterpointed, in Simon Faithfull's video, *30km*, by the rapid ascent of a small weather balloon, as it soars, from the artist's cradling hands, on its launch pad in the New Forest, to the edge of space. Combining a mood of reverie with the aura of a scientific experiment, *30km* finds an echo in Charles and Ray Eames' famous film *Powers of Ten*, which hurtles through eye-popping intervals of magnification in its journey to the heavens and back again.

Look up at the sky at night and one of the brightest lights you will see there may most likely be a satellite, looking down at you. As of 2017, there were over 4,000 unmanned satellites orbiting the planet, sending back images to information or intelligence gathering agencies, helping calibrate GPS systems or updating global mapping archives such as Google Earth. This cornucopia of satellite images has provided a rich source of material for artists, and the British/Belgian photographer Mishka Henner has been one of the quickest to relay and deploy their significance. His photo work, *Dutch Landscapes*, is a case in point.

Although companies like Google operate an 'open skies' policy when it comes to sharing their satellite images, some governments and corporations take a dim view of this unrestricted public access, opting to censor some of the sites that they consider most sensitive. In the case of the Dutch government, the chosen method of blotting out parts of the

landscape is to hide a building (or a complex of buildings) behind a fig-leaf of distorted pixellation; an action that simultaneously obscures and draws attention to the area. Although Henner appropriates this material as a kind of 'ready-made', eschewing further intervention and letting the images speak for itself, these pieces have an odd kinship with Cornelia Parker's conceptual speculations on the potential fall-out of an asteroid strike on London, as traced on ordnance survey maps of the capital.



Another source of inspiration for the exhibition is the work and life of the painter, Eric Ravilious. Long celebrated (at Towner Art Gallery and internationally) for his elegantly muted watercolour views of the English countryside, and where the rolling hills of his native Sussex were often depicted from an elevated position high on the South Downs, Ravilious's pastoral landscapes were supplemented and shadowed by a series of paintings made in the last years of his life, during a period spent as official war artist – a time that was cut tragically short when the RAF plane that he was travelling in was lost off the coast of Iceland on a search and rescue mission. As a kind of memento to Ravilious, the inclusion of a quartet of painters from the collections of the Arts Council, Towner Gallery and the Imperial War Museum (by Peter Lanyon, Carol Rhodes, Michael Andrews and Charles Nevinson) enacts a kind of metaphorical flypast salute to some of Ravilious's late works (such as the iconic *Hurricanes in Flight*, 1942) that functions also as a symbolic reminder of how the practices and perspectives of painting were expanded during the 20th century through the experience of flight, or impacted by the outbreak of war.

Elsewhere, a manipulated photograph by Dan Holdsworth, of the aerial view of a glacier in Iceland, alludes to the northerly latitudes that captivated Ravilious's imagination in his later years. Here, though, as Holdsworth draws out, by reversing the chromatics of the photograph, the land below, while no longer exposed to the hazards of war, faces a new threat of climate change. Closer to home, and as a paean to the rolling topography of southern England that Ravilious immortalised, Annabel Howland's specially commissioned *Bournes, Deans, Bottoms and Brows* hymns the gentle contours of a landscape that Ravilious cherished through an evocative mix of cartographic images, aerial photographs and drawings.

Steven Bode

IMAGE CREDITS:

Left: Jananne Al-Ani, *Shadow Sites I*, 2010. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Jananne Al-Ani

Above: Simon Faithfull, *30km*, 2003. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Simon Faithfull